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Books

High-Wire Act

THE MAN WHO KEPT THE SECRETS
by Thomas Powers
Knopf; 393 pages; $12.95

The CIA has been the target of so many attacks in recent years that the once highly secret agency is now more familiar to the general public than, say, the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Yet all the revelations by disgruntled former employees and leftist ideologues have not added up to a balanced appraisal of the agency. To a considerable extent, that task has been accomplished by Thomas Powers, a former U.P.I. reporter who won a Pulitzer Prize in 1971 for his coverage of the radical bomber Diana Oughton. With near clinical detachment, Powers has produced a remarkably realistic portrait of American intelligence beset by bureaucratic rivalries, personality clashes and presidential caprice.

The agency, Powers believes, was badly served, as was the central figure in his narrative, Richard Helms, who headed the CIA from 1966 to 1973. A consummate professional, Helms was the proverbial man in the middle. His job was to furnish the best possible intelligence, and yet he had to contend with intense political pressures from the White House and the Pentagon. It was a high-wire act from which every CIA director has sooner or later tumbled.

Helms, as Powers sees him, was far from the stereotype superspy. Neither dashing nor adventurous, he was cool and cautious, perhaps to a fault. A colleague recalls him remarking about a project: "Let's do it right, let's do it quietly, let's do it correctly." He was especially skeptical of large-scale covert actions because he felt they drew too much attention to the CIA and jeopardized its main function: collecting intelligence.

Still, as a good soldier, Helms was dragged into operations against his better judgment. A case in point was the attempt to assassinate Fidel Castro. As the author describes the episode, John and Bobby Kennedy told the CIA to get rid of Castro. That is why Helms was so disgusted during the later Senate investigation of the CIA when Frank Church demanded written proof of an order to kill the Cuban leader. Helms felt like responding (but didn't): "Senator, how can you be so goddamned dumb? You don't put an order like that in *writing*."

When Helms was named CIA director by Lyndon Johnson, he had been thoroughly schooled in careful handling of Presidents. Nevertheless, writes Powers, Helms may have been too diffident about asserting himself on critical issues. Confronted with varying estimates of the strength of the North Vietnamese forces, he did not consistently back up his own analysts. He tried to compromise between the White House and Pentagon optimism and the more pessimistic CIA projections. As a result, says Powers, the U.S. was unprepared for the ferocity of the 1968 *Tet* offensive.

But even the resilient Helms could not cope with the mounting pressures of the Nixon era. Communication between the President and the CIA became a problem. The National Security Council and the CIA, writes Powers, were "like ships passing in the night."

Nixon dumped Helms when he failed to provide sufficient cover-up for Watergate. In departing, Helms once again took the rap for what his superiors had ordered. He was charged with lying to a Senate committee about the CIA's role in the attempt to prevent Salvador Allende from becoming President of Chile, a Nixon-Kissinger project he had vainly opposed. Helms was fined $2,000 and received a two-year suspended sentence and a lecture from the judge about telling the truth. He felt it was his job to keep the secrets, and that he did—pointing up the moral of this fair and searching book: America's intelligence can be no better than the Presidents it serves. — ***Edwin Warner***